Kurdish Studies
March 2022
Volume: 10, No: 1, pp 393 - 399
ISSN: 2051-4883 (Print) | ISSN 2051-4891 (Online)
www.KurdishStudies.net

DOI: 10.53555/ks.v10i1.4084

" Different Views from Different Windows ": Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* and the Literary Subversion of Ableist Disability Narratives

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Abstract
Disabled people have relentlessly been spoken about, and persistently been denied the authority to speak for themselves. Historically, disability narratives have been shaped far more by the cultural assumptions of the non-disabled majority – addressing ableist anxieties, fascinations and need for resolutions- rather than the experiential truths of those whose bodies they purport to represent. Although Firdaus Kanga's novel *Trying to Grow* has attracted sustained critical attention, it has predominantly been read through the hermeneutic lens of Parsi minority identity in postcolonial India. This paper validates that when read through the theoretical frameworks of critical disability studies, Kanga's *Trying to Grow* enacts a far more sophisticated and subversive engagement with disability than the dominant allegorical reading has conventionally permitted. *Trying to Grow* portrays disability as a lived, embodied and politically charged experience, one that demands to be read on its own terms. This paper establishes that *Trying to Grow* stages a quadruple challenge to the interlocking discourses through which disability has been historically constructed, socially administered, and culturally normalised; and thereby dismantles the medical model of disability, the supercrip paradigm, the disempowering logic of care, and the desexualisation of disabled people.

Keywords: Critical disability studies, Medical model, Supercrip Care Desexualisation

Introduction

Disabled people have relentlessly been spoken about, and persistently been denied the authority to speak for themselves. Michael Bérubé observes, "disability demands a story" (570). However, historically, disability narratives have been shaped far more by the cultural assumptions of the non-disabled majority – addressing ableist anxieties, fascinations and need for resolutions- rather than the experiential truths of those whose bodies they purport to represent. Mark Sherry captures the structural asymmetry of this condition when he states that disabled people have been "spoken about, and spoken for, but rarely listened to" (165). David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder theorise this literary and cultural exclusion of disabled individuals in their foundational work and argue that disability operates within literary and cultural production as "a narrative prosthesis"—a rhetorical crutch upon which narratives lean when they require a convenient emblem of deviance, crisis, or transcendence, and which is discarded once its symbolic work is done (49). Mitchell and Snyder's concept reveals something more fundamental than a mere misrepresentation; they assert that the problem in disability representation is structural rather than incidental; they expose the dependency- how the mainstream narrative depends on the disabled body as a convenient site of conflict and resolution, while the real experiences of living with disability are pushed aside for narrative convenience. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson theorises disability as a site of "cultural work," a set of representational practices that organize social meanings of bodily difference in ways that reaffirm the normative and pathologize the exceptional (*Extraordinary Bodies* 16). Paul Hunt's assertion, "We are tired of being statistics, cases, wonderfully courageous examples to the world, pitiable objects to stimulate funding" (145)—indexes how disablist bias has been embedded in the literary and cultural productions, and disabled individuals are considered as familial and social burdens. These theorisations expose the foundational asymmetry at the heart of disability representation; stories ostensibly about disabled lives are, in fact, structured by and for the abled imaginary, producing disabled characters not as subjects with interiority and political complexity but as allegorical instruments through which majority of cultural anxieties are negotiated and resolved. This representational bias becomes even more visible in postcolonial literary traditions, where disability has been consistently and reductively allegorised as the wounded nation, endangered community, or the fractured body politic. It is precisely against this theoretical premises, that Firdaus Kanga's semi-autobiographical novel *Trying to Grow* (first published in 1990) demands to be read. Although Kanga's novel has attracted sustained critical attention, it has predominantly been read through the hermeneutic lens of Parsi minority identity; its embattled position in postcolonial India; and its very fragility allegorising the vulnerability of the community to the demographical and cultural disillusion. Moncy Mathew and S. Nagesh remark, "Kanga's story is not so much about the brittle boned Darius who never knows when he is going to break his next bone, but more about a community which suffers from a greater disease –the threat of extinction. In sympathizing with the painful existence of Brit the readers are sympathizing with the community itself" (80). Such an approach to the novel, endorses precisely what Mitchell and Snyder term "narrative prosthesis" (49) and reads Brit's embodied experience of impairment as an ethno-religious allegory; Brit Kotwal's disease osteogenesis imperfecta becomes a metaphor for collective Parsi vulnerability; dissolves the disabled subject into an allegory to render him epistemologically invisible; and forecloses any possibility for a serious engagement with disability as a lived, political and theoretically complex experience demanding critical attention. Having said this, this paper undertakes a counteractive reorientation. This paper validates that when read through the theoretical frameworks of critical disability studies, Kanga's *Trying to Grow* enacts a far more sophisticated and subversive engagement with disability than the dominant allegorical reading has conventionally permitted; the novel challenges the hegemonic discourses of ableism; and portrays disability as a lived, embodied and politically charged experience, one that demands to be read on its own terms. This paper establishes that Kanga's novel *Trying to Grow* stages a quadruple challenge to the interlocking discourses through which disability has been historically constructed, socially administered, and culturally normalised; and thereby dismantles the medical model of disability, the supercrip paradigm, the disempowering logic of care, and the desexualisation of disabled people.

One of the first critiques in the novel is directed at the "medical model" (Linton 22), which individuates disability as a pathological deficit located within the body of the disabled individual and positions care or rehabilitation as the only socially intelligible response to that deficit. However, disability scholars working within frameworks of the "social model" (Davis 8) have challenged the assumptions of the medical model. Michael Oliver draws distinction between "impairment" as the functional limitation arising from a particular bodily condition, and "disability" as the social oppression imposed upon people with impairments by a world organised around normative assumptions about bodily capacity (11). The medical model on the other hand, collapses this distinction and treats disability synonymous with impairment to naturalise the attitudinal, architectural and institutional barriers that disable people far more comprehensively than their impairments alone ever could. At the same time, the quest for normality or able-bodiedness is so strong that parents of disabled child(ren) often take recourse to multiple measures in order to find a cure to the disability or to minimise the difference. Brit's father Sam too leaves no stone unturned to find a possible cure for osteogenesis imperfecta. He explores a wide spectrum of remedies ranging from conventional visits to medical practitioners to tradition and folk based interventions, like application of almond oil, consumption of powdered pearls and goat bone marrow, recourse to the Breathing Generator, seeking solace of Parsi prayers, and so-called blessings from the con man called Wagh Baba. An overpowering influence of "religious model" (Eiesland 73-74) of disability that sees disability as a divine punishment for moral transgression, and medical model that emphasises on finding a cure to the disabled/ deformed body, in the Indian social and cultural milieu is quite evident here. However, Kanga challenges this reductive ontology of religious and medical models and asserts Brit's selfhood as something more than a mere diagnosis of his bodily deficits, and goes on to validate his identity constituted through dimensions of experience – desire, wit, relational complexity and embodied self-knowledge that pathologization can neither fully account for nor contain. As prescribed in the social model of disability, Kotwals explore new ways to incorporate difference and impairment, and help Brit carve his identity and character: "In a counterpoint to the notion of burden, here the disabled child brings something of value in to the family which changes the family and signals the child's centrality and importance to the lives they are a part of" (McLaughlin 405).

The second critique targets the ideological formation that disability scholars have theorised as the "supercrip" (Clare 2) paradigm – a narrative convention that, in the guise of celebrating disabled achievement, in fact consolidates ableist norms by positioning the disabled person as an exceptional individual who transcends impairment through superhuman resolve, thereby individualising disability and deflecting attention from the structural and social conditions that constitute disablement as a political rather than merely medical phenomenon. Although, the medical model and the supercrip paradigm approach disability from two opposite ends, one through pathology and other through exceptionalism, yet they converge at the same ideological destination. Both conspire to keep disability depoliticised, by treating disability as either a personal tragedy to be corrected or a triumph to be celebrated, and confine its meaning to the individual body, individual will and individual story. This double-edged representational regime -simultaneously pitying and celebratory, but always individualising and depoliticising – has been criticised by disabled people, who have insisted that disabled people require neither the compassion of the medical gaze, nor the admiration of the supercrip narrative, rather the dignity of genuine equality with equal access, equal participation, and equal recognition as full and irreducible human beings. It is within this theoretical framework that Kanga's novel assumes particular significance. *Trying to Grow* stages its counter-discursive intervention through a moment of meta-narrative reflexivity that encapsulates the novel's epistemological project. Brit expresses his discomfort at Father Ferra's awarding him a prize he considers entirely unearned—a prize premised not on achievement but on the condescending recognition of his survival—"Father Ferra giving me that prize for nothing"; and Madame Manekshaw sums it up as "different views from different windows" (Kanga 55). Multiple perspectives from multiple positions- sums up the core essence of *Trying to Grow* . The phrase functions as an epistemological thesis statement for the novel as a whole. Father Ferra's perspective constructs Brit's ordinary life as an inspirational narrative of extraordinary courage. This is the supercrip paradigm in its purest form. The novel makes visible the ideological gap between the able-bodied observer's narrative of inspirational courage and the disabled subject's experience of an unremarkable every day. What reads as exceptional from one window is, from another, simply life. The distance between these two stances carries real political weight. G. Thomas Couser states that disability life writing becomes truly counter-discursive when it refuses the preferred rhetorics of triumph and inspiration that dominant culture has scripted on disabled people (203). Kanga gives this refusal its most nuanced literary articulation: Brit does not simply reject the supercrip label; he maps the perspectival conditions that produce it, locating Father Ferra's gaze not in malice but in the normative assumptions that make extraordinary what is, for Brit, ordinary. So, what this paper tries to outline, is the fact that Kanga is conscious of what *Trying to Grow* as a piece of literature is, and what it refuses to be. It refuses to be a medical narrative of pathology and cure. It refuses to be an inspirational narrative of individual triumph and overcoming. Instead, it narrates disability from a 'panoramic perspective' – wide enough to hold multiple and competing viewpoints in view; critical enough to expose the ideological assumptions embedded in each; and politically honest enough to locate impairment, not in the isolated individual body but in the social, cultural, historical and political conditions that shape the experience of living life with disability.

Firdaus Kanga was born in Bombay in 1960. He was born with a disease known as brittle bone disease (Osteogenesis Imperfecta). In his semi-autobiographical novel *Trying to Grow* Kanga through Darius or Brit recreates his own struggle with stigmatisation as Brit too is diagnosed with brittle bone disease. "Stigma represents a view of life; a set of personal and social constructs; a set of social relations and social relationships; a form of social reality" (Coleman 141). The very fact that Kotwal family chooses to call him as 'Brit' Puts forth a counter discourse to the feelings of shame and stigma generally associated with disability, "'I'm going to call him Brit! That's short for brittle!'. . . ' . . His disease is nothing to feel embarrassed about'" (Kanga 32) . Sera's acceptance of her new born can be read as her embrace of disability merely as a bodily variation. She says, "He's our son, he's a boy like any other; only his body has problems" (Kanga 31). The doctor's response on the other hand, "I'm afraid I have bad news for you" and Sam's "mournful " and "thumbs-down" attitude towards birth of a disabled child, depict the social outlook on disability that results in either feeling stigmatized or stigmatization (Kanga 30-31). Kanga skilfully disentangles the complexities and paradoxes of stigma by juxtaposing multiple perspectives on birth of a disabled child and deliberates a discussion on what is/ should be considered as normal/ abnormal? ".. That Sera's behaviour was unnatural is undeniable. But are the responses we expect the only natural ones?"(Kanga 31). Through these multiple and distinct views on Brit's disability, Kanga proficiently manages to direct our attention to not only the overriding stereotypes and prejudice towards disability, but also to an alternate and equally authentic way in which disability can be accepted as part of human diversity like race, gender, caste, etc. The normative assumptions on disability are governed by negative stereotypes and view disability as a tragic existence. Garland-Thomson rightly sums it up, it is a "story of despair, catastrophe, loss, excess, suffering, and relentless cure-seeking" ("Shape" 114). The process of stigmatisation is based on a relationship of dichotomy where certain attributes are considered desirable and superior in comparison to others that are undesirable and thus inferior. "If stigma is a social construct, constructed by cultures, by social groups, and by individuals to designate some human differences as discrediting, then the stigmatization process is indeed a powerful and pernicious social tool" (Coleman 143). Brit, of course, does not fit into the ideal prototype of a young, tall and able-bodied male figure; his disability is an undesirable attribute that makes him discredited whether in job market or for sexual and romantic relationships. Stigma for disability prescribes dependence, passivity, helplessness, docility, and melancholy for the disabled individual and goes on to affect not only the individual concerned but also others around him including family members, friends and relatives. Stigma is intrinsically connected with the feelings of fear, pity and disgust for disability and creates antipathy and rejection for the disabled body. Consequently, the urge to overcome stigma and align oneself with non-stigmatised individuals is so strong that the stigmatised individuals often adopt strategies of " "passing" or disguising the stigma and acting "normal" by "covering up"—keeping up with the pace of nonstigmatized individuals" (Coleman 147). Sam asks Brit, "'How d'you do it, Brit?' . . . 'Live.' . . . 'You seem to be quite happy. Are you?'" (Kanga 42) . Kanga delves into complexity of emotions where Sam has not only internalised the tragic view of disability but also fears that Brit might be 'passing' or feigning to be happy in his life. Sera on the other hand refuses to allow pity to define others' perceptions of Brit. Throughout the narrative, we see Brit negotiating with his own feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability. Kanga demonstrates that stigma manifests differently in each person's consciousness, and thus there is no definite singular approach to address it. The novel showcases 'different views' and 'different individual responses' to living with disability as different people internalize stigma in distinct ways, rendering any one-size-fits-all coping mechanism ineffective.

Although the text primarily revolves around Brit, Kanga introduces his readers to two more disabled characters, namely Tina and Aloo Manekshaw, throwing more light on disability perception in Indian society. Kanga presents disability not as a stable category but as a fluid and permeable experience. Tina's character facilitates an engagement not only with Deaf culture and sign language, but also audism and politics of translation. Through Tina, Kanga while on one hand once again introduces the medical model that pathologizes her disability, he also destabilizes ableist assumptions by portraying her not as a tragic figure to be pitied but as a vivacious, witty interlocutor whose disability facilitates rather than forecloses intimacy, humour, and subversive social commentary. Tina's exclusion from hearing conversations is not presented as 'limitation', rather shared nonverbal exchanges between Brit and Tina in sign language create an accessible, barrier-free space between them. As the social model suggests, the problem is not Tina's deafness, but the social environment that excludes her from hearing conversations. There is also a complex interplay between agency and infantilization. While her sign language becomes a tool of social resistance and gives her agency to indulge in private social commentary against the norms of normative politeness, there is also a risk of her subversive potential eventually getting patronised and subsumed under paternalistic pity politics. Garland-Thomson's concept of "misfitting" captures how disability, gender, and familial status converge to produce specific forms of exclusion and accommodation ("Misfits" 592). Tina fits / gets accommodated within Brit's signed world but misfits the hearing, ableist sociability around her. Moreover, Kanga not only falls short of participating in the vibrant linguistic and cultural community of Deaf people, but also validates the notion of hearing hegemony when Brit consciously chooses to protect hearing sensibilities rather than accurately conveying Tina's thoughts. This act of translation-as-betrayal reveals how disabled voices are mediated, sanitized, and controlled by non-disabled intermediaries for abled consumption, reinforcing what Garland-Thomson terms "the spectacle of bodily otherness" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 17). Nevertheless, Kanga also illustrates a relationship of "crip solidarity" (Mingus) between Brit and Tina; they share a bond formed through mutual understanding of marginalization and stigmatisation; they inhabit "disabled spaces" that facilitate an alternate being challenging ableist norms; and they celebrate difference by redefining deficit. On the other hand, Aloo Manekshaw is an old lady whom Brit meets first and last time at Madame Manekshaw's funeral. Conversation between the two puts the old lady's perspective of loss and regret in contrast with Brit's perspective of adaptation. It is interesting to note how this brief encounter captures the novel's larger objective of introducing 'different views' on rethinking disability. Kanga artistically achieves a masterful literary moment where he affirms disability—not as a monolithic identity but as a deeply contingent, temporal, and subjective experience. Contrary to Brit an Tina, Aloo Manekshaw embodies the tragedy of late-acquired disability. Her grief is not merely physical but temporal and aspirational. Her litany of lost dreams "I could have . . . seen Paris, dressed at Dior, had a little villa in the Nilgiris" (Kanga 83)exposes disability as a theft of a happy future she had expected waiting for her. An emphasis on "I could have" and "now, what's the use?" (Kanga 83) articulates a lamentation not for mobility itself but for the life that mobility was meant to unlock.

Kanga refuses to sentimentalize her; she is envious, resentful, even slightly petulant—authentically human. At the same time, Brit's response—"But you can be in a wheelchair and still have a good time" (Kanga 83) —is not naive optimism but the hard-won pragmatism of someone who has never known an alternative. His congenital condition means he has built a self around, not despite, his wheelchair. Aloo recognizes this: "That's how you've always been. I wasn't like this till six months ago" (Kanga 83). Kanga dismantles the notion of disability as a unified category and depicts two radically different subject positions. While Brit's wheelchair is an extension of self, for her it becomes an alien appendage. Towards the closure of this episode, Kanga symbolically transforms Madame Manekshaw's funeral ritual into a living grief where Aloo, though alive, is also mourning a death—the death of her able-bodied self. In this brief encounter, Kanga successfully makes visible the porous, contingent nature of impairment, and insists that there are as many ways to inhabit a disabled body as there are bodies themselves.

Brit leads a life sheltered and cocooned by his family and friends always willing to help him. The privilege of his middle class position provides him an access to not only formal education, but also an exposure to literature, art and music for his intellectual stimulation. Amidst all this, Kanga also scrutinises the complex relationship between the care giver and the disabled person as a care seeker, interrogating how benevolent intent can calcify into structures of subjugation. *Trying to Grow* does not romanticise "care" (Morris) rather it dissects it, directing its scrutiny at who provides care, who receives it, and what it silently takes from both. Often, a disabled person's opinion/ desire/ need is undermined and the care givers tend to do things for the care seeker as per their assumptions. Within the Kotwal household, care is not a simple act of love, rather it is a site of power, negotiated across the axes of able-bodied assumption and disability-ascribed dependency. Brit states, "Actually, I took a bath by myself every day but whenever we had to go somewhere important Sam washed me. It was safer. As for dressing, no one would believe it, but till I was fourteen I came out of my bath naked and lay down on a bath mat, spread over my bed. Then Sera or Dolly would sprinkle me with talc all over, cooing, 'Now lift your arms. Turn on your stomach.' Then they'd tuck me into my clothes and brush my hair with a baby-blue baby's hairbrush. I was perfectly capable of doing all this myself. But you know how it is, when you can't do some things people feel you can't do anything." (Kanga 48 -49). The 'cooing' register, though tender, yet diminutive and infantilising is problematic. Kotwal family conflates Brit's partial dependence with absolute dependence and forecloses his agency by assuming incapacity. Singh and Ghai argue, the assumption of "diminished capability" locks the disabled individual into cycles of care and protection, ultimately producing what they term "diminished agency" (130). The disabled person's opinion, desire, and need are thereby systematically undermined, not through cruelty, but through what critical disability studies has termed paternalistic care — the well-meaning substitution of the caregiver's assumptions for the care-seeker's expressed will. For Brit, the morning ritual of being dressed and powdered performs not merely hygiene but a daily re-inscription of helplessness. The baby-blue hairbrush is a quietly devastating symbol: it marks the body of the adolescent Brit as perpetually infantile, refusing him the adult social status that disability scholars recognise as central to the quality of life for persons with disabilities (Umb Carlsson and Adolfsson 274).

Conversely, Kanga is equally attentive to the caregiver's own predicament, and the novel does not subject Sera or Sam to facile moral condemnation. The family members as care givers are often in quandary as depicted in Sera's remark, "The holidays are over, I suppose" on returning home from vacations with Brit's 'leg in a cast' (Kanga 70). Sera as an able-bodied mother "attempts to adhere to an idealized image and, since the image is forever elusive, she remains unsuccessful" (Aneja and Vaidya xvi). She voices her dilemma "Imagine needing a holiday from your own child and all the time wishing you didn't feel like that, because you love him, and you don't need holidays from someone you love" (Kanga 70). What Sera articulates here, are the conflicting feelings of deep love for her son on one hand and an equally important need to be free from the caregiving role at least for some time. Philosopher Eva Feder Kittay has argued that societies built around ideals of independence and self-sufficiency push the reality of human dependency into the private home, making each family carry the weight of care "individually rather than collectively" (293). Sera's exhaustion and guilt are therefore not just a mother's private struggle — they are the direct outcome of a system that places the entire responsibility of caring for a disabled child on the family, and especially on women within it. Kanga provides an acute glimpse into the lived reality of a woman experiencing everyday trials of mothering a child with disability and "experiencing physical, emotional, psychological and financial stress; attempting to juggle her multiple roles and responsibilities while seeking to love; and understand and do their best for the child" (Vaidya 108). The novel's gaze then widens from the Kotwal household to the neighbourhood, exposing how the privatisation of care gives way to not only exhaustion but also gossip, judgement and stigma. Ruby's parents, Defarge and other neighbours opine that Kotwals are deliberately not marrying their daughter who is "twenty-four, five feet-six, graduate, earning," because they want Dolly to take care of Brit after they are gone (Kanga 71). Ironically, the anticipation that Brit would outlive his parents gives way to anxiety, fear, speculation, judgement, and stigmatisation both within and around Kotwal family, rather than exploring alternate possibilities for a life with independence, autonomy and dignity for Brit. What the neighbours read as a selfish decision by the Kotwal parents is, in fact, the symptom of a society that has made no real provision for disabled people to live independently. 'Care' - a case in point here becomes an individual and private matter, that Kotwal family must take up as a responsibility and fulfil it, rather than seeking a broader participation from professional, institutional and community settings providing "spaces for the development of affirmative and productive relationships with them" (McLaughlin 408). Such unquestioned "privatization of care" makes 'care' "a form of charity and private responsibility rather than public right and entitlement," and leads to the "marginalisation of such families" and "enforce the caring role on the mother" or other female members in the family (McLaughlin 408). The assumed, internalised and attributed burden of caring for disabled Brit has a devastating impact on Sam and finally translates into his tragic decision to end his life on the evening Dolly gets married. Sam's suicide can thus be read as more than a personal tragedy — it is what happens when the emotional and moral weight of care, left entirely to one individual, becomes impossible to carry. Kanga, however, envisages an alternative trajectory for Brit – a life with dignity and autonomy, something that society often fails to imagine or acknowledge. Towards the end of the novel, Brit lives his life independently in his Bombay flat after Sera has died and Dolly has left Bombay to live with her husband. In doing so, *Trying to Grow* stakes a quietly radical claim: that the politics of care must be reimagined not as a private burden distributed along gendered and familial lines, but as a collective, institutional, and ethical project in which the subjectivity, desire, and independence of the disabled person remain inviolable.

Systematic desexualisation of disabled people within literary and cultural representation is perhaps one of the most unexplored areas, that demands critical attention. Kanga turns his critical gaze to inextricably entangled questions on desire and sexuality – who gets to desire; who is considered desirable; and who is written out of that story altogether . Dominant cultural attitudes tend to exclude people with disabilities from the discourse of sexuality, and consider them neither as agents nor recipients of desire. Anna Mollow and Robert McRuer observe, "the sexuality of disabled people is typically depicted in terms of either tragic deficiency or freakish excess" (1). This cultural binary wherein the disabled body is categorised as either too broken to desire or too strange to be desired, ousts disabled individuals from the space of erotic imagination of the society. Disability scholars identify this as the process of "desexualisation", — a condition in which disabled individuals' "sexuality or sexual identity is discouraged or denied," and their worth as "romantic partners is minimized" or dismissed outright (Olkin et al. 770). Kanga maps this cultural impasse onto the intimate world of the Kotwal family with uncomfortable precision. While Sam believes Brit will never attract a romantic partner on account of his disability, and Sera quietly reconciles herself to a future in which Brit remains a bachelor, Jeroo goes further still, refusing to recognise Brit as gendered at all. Brit remarks, " I wasn't male. Not to them. The magic mirrors of their minds had invented a formula: osteo = sexlessness" (Kanga 40). The word "formula" is telling — it suggests not prejudice born of individual cruelty but a social script so thoroughly internalised that it operates with the cold certainty of arithmetic. Desirability, in this world, is inseparable from able-bodiedness; the disabled body is presumed, as a matter of course, to fall outside the territory of romantic and erotic life. This cultural verdict does not remain outside Brit — it travels inward, colonising his sense of himself. As research on disability and physical change consistently shows, bodily difference can "diminish a person's self-esteem, sense of attractiveness, relationships, and sexual functioning," leaving disabled persons isolated from affection, touch, and intimacy (Higgins et al. 2561). This internalisation surfaces in Brit's behaviour with painful directness. When he and Ruby stand on the threshold of their first kiss, Brit holds back: "it was awful—I thought she didn't deserve a kiss from me" (Kanga 81). The cruelty of this moment lies in its reversal — it is not Ruby's reluctance that forecloses intimacy, but Brit's own ableist self-assessment, delivered upon himself before anyone else can deliver it. He has taken the world's verdict about his body and made it his own. Kanga makes Brit stranded between two ends. While Brit doesn't consider himself worthy of finding a possible romantic partner in able bodied Ruby, the possibility of finding romantic love in Tina is also aborted on account of her disability. Brit says, "But I knew I didn't really want Tina. Not the way you want a girl when you're fifteen. Because then you've got to have everything just right—soft music and poetry and whispered somethings. And they wouldn't have worked their magic on her ears. I didn't want a deaf girlfriend even though she was a gorgeous girl and a fabulous friend." (Kanga 96). The critical density of this passage lies in its candour. Brit does not disguise his rejection of Tina in comfortable language; he states it plainly. Yet Kanga leaves the reader to observe what Brit himself cannot quite name: that in wanting only an able-bodied romantic partner, he reproduces the very logic that has written him out of the world of desire. He has absorbed ableism so thoroughly that he turns it on someone whose difference mirrors his own. Further, Brit's relationship with his own body is marked by a striking internal contradiction. While the upper half of his body gives him self-affirmation, he finds it difficult to accept the disabled aspect of his lower body and treats it with hostility and contempt. He says, "my legs thin as a famine-child's, the shins bowed as if some kid had plastered on some clay as a joke" (Kanga 203). Renu Addlakha says, "Sexuality is an area of distress, exclusion and self-doubt for persons with disabilities. Sexuality at core is about acceptance of self and acceptance by others" (4). For Brit, these two forms of acceptance are inseparable — he cannot extend himself to others without first making peace with his own body, and making that peace requires dismantling the cultural architecture that taught him his body was not worth accepting. Nevertheless, Kanga scrupulously maps the gradual development of Brit's awareness of his own sexual identity both shaped and challenged by the cultural and social myths on disability. For instance, on the night Amy wants Brit to make love to her, Brit remembers that "Amy hadn't seen my legs, ever" and fears that she would leave him and "she would go back to Cyrus and his hard long limbs" (Kanga 224). In the ableist culture, an able body is the perfect body and hence desirable for love, sex and marriage. Disabled people are rarely seen as desiring subjects or worth being desired, especially when it comes to forming romantic relationships. Kanga illustrates broader social and cultural anxieties around disability, desirability and intimate relationship, especially when such a relationship exists between a disabled individual and an able-bodied person. "Not only do they become objects of the stare and often unsolicited pity, but the motives and health of their partners are also questioned when they happen to be non-disabled like Amy" (Bhattacherjee 94). Kanga proficiently pens down a complex interplay between the karma theory and religious model of disability on one hand, and desexualisation, stigmatisation and marginalisation of people with disabilities on the other hand. Nevertheless, as the title *Trying to Grow* suggests, with Brit falling in love with Cyrus, Kanga charts Brit's battle with sexual fluidity along with "growth as an individual —a learning to question the socio-cultural notions that govern who we desire and how" (Bhattacherjee 97). By depicting a homosexual relationship between Brit and Cyrus- an individual living with disability and his able-bodied counterpart- Kanga interrogates and unsettles the conventional normative constructions of masculinity. In the socio-cultural landscape of India, where homosexuality is stigmatised, considered transgressive, and medically pathologized with people like Wagh Baba claiming to cure this deviance, a romantic relationship between Brit and Cyrus acquires a layered subversive significance, simultaneously pushing back against the enforced norms of compulsive heterosexuality and the cultural erasure of disabled people from the domain of desire and sexuality. As Santinele Martino observes, disability studies and queer theory "share similar goals in terms of questioning normalcy as well as compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness," and their convergence opens space to imagine bodies, desires, and relationships that neither framework alone can fully account for (Santinele Martino). The Brit-Cyrus relationship operates precisely in this shared space of refusal. Nevertheless, Brit's intimate relationships with both Cyrus and Amy prove unsustainable. Upon reflection, Brit arrives at the painful realisation that the collapse of these relationships was not incidental but rooted in his own profound insecurities about his disabled body. His urge to pursue external validation from conventionally attractive and intellectually celebrated individuals, had been a foundational weakness, driving him to seek confirmation of his worth both as a desiring and desirable subject from those very people whose approval he feared losing. Concurrently, *Trying to Grow* is not solely about Brit's personal development. It is equally a story of growth for Amy and Cyrus, who through their relationship with Brit are confronted with their internalised prejudices on disability and during the course learn the lessons of acceptance, empathy, inclusion and human solidarity. "In doing so, they grow as individuals, friends and lovers and learn as much about themselves as about Brit" (Bhattacherjee 100). Kanga's ultimate achievement in this vertical of the novel is to insist that sexuality — desire, intimacy, selfhood — is not a privilege that disability forfeits. It is a domain from which disabled persons have been excluded by culture, and one that the novel steadily, and sometimes painfully, works to reclaim.

Conclusion

Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* resists the hermeneutic of pity that so often circumscribes the narratives of disability and instead stages a polyvalent scrutiny of what Garland -Thompson terms as "normate" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 8)– the standardized norms against which disabled bodies are measured as aberrant. Kanga skillfully interweaves a chorus of competing perspectives in the formal structure of the novel to contest any unidimensional view of Brit's embodied experience. The suffocating tenderness of Sera, the quiet exasperation of Sam, the curiosity and occasional cruelty of neighbors like Ruby and Defarge, the complicated desires of Cyrus and Amy, and Brit's own interiority – cannot be categorized as either right or wrong, rather map the discursive battlefield upon which Brit's identity is contested. Kanga thus posits disability not as a static biologic given but as a dynamic social and relational construct, a site of perpetual negotiation where fresh meanings are interpreted with every encounter. This negotiation powerfully illuminates the phenomenological chasm between the social gaze (how Brit is seen) and self's interiority (how Brit sees himself). His desire functions as a form of self-assertion and a refusal to accept asexuality and passivity that ableist ideology scripts for impaired bodies. Therefore, *Trying to Grow* foregrounds several of the foundational arguments of disability studies: the primary barriers that the persons with disability experience are not physical impairments but social and attitudinal obstacles (Oliver); and the right to selfhood, intimacy and independent living is not contingent on bodily normativity. Further, in the novel's culminating vision, Brit Kotwal abandons the structures of dependance that once defined him; he inhabits his own apartment on his own terms without anyone to shelter or manage him. Brit's trajectory charts the arduous process of constructing what Shilpa Anand identifies as a "modern disability subjectivity" (254), one forged through the systematic dismantling of internalized cultural myths. His decision to live independently is an epistemological rupture - a shift from a state of enforced dependance to one of self-determination. Kanga interrogates the ontology of the 'normal' and asks 'what is normal' rather 'if that which is deemed as normal/natural by the society is the only normal? Brit's act of getting his kitchen redesigned to the wheel chair accessible height can be seen as a "micro political" (McRuer 9; Kafer 17) act in the space of disability rights activism to demand that the world be remade and redefined through principles of universal design to accommodate difference rather than one that demands conformity from those who cannot meet its existing standards. Simultaneously, Kanga avoids the dual trap of either depicting this vision of redefined world as uncomplicated and universally available, or making it a triumphant (or overcoming) narrative, by embedding Brit's agency within a matrix of privilege. Brit's privileged class position with an access to education, to cultural capital, and to a household with the means to provide care, shapes his agency and resistance, something that can be understood as what Tobin Siebers terms "complex embodiment" (25) that accounts for the social, economic and political realities shaping disabled lives. The freedoms that Brit is able to negotiate, however hard-won, are not universally available to all disabled individuals, and Kanga's honesty about this specificity prevents the novel from collapsing into being an "inspiration porn" that Stella Young identifies as a reductive and nonreciprocal gaze. It may be said that Brit's story is only one of the stories of disability conditioned by the intersectionality of class, gender and socio-economic circumstances that shape his world. Concurrently, the tragic and cautionary arc of Tina's story provides the novel's most trenchant critique. Her fate, shaped by the intersection of disability, gender and sexuality, reveals how social vulnerabilities are compounded for those who deviate from multiple normative axes and can neither be absorbed nor resolved even within the broader optimism of the novel like *Trying to Grow*. While on one hand, Brit's desires find expression and he is able to attain independence, Tina's claim to selfhood on the other hand is punished far more harshly presenting a stark reminder that the social world operates through interlocking systems of oppression, distributing precarity unevenly. Finally, by holding these multiple and contradictory views in tension, *Trying to Grow* transcends its immediate narrative to probe a broader cultural critique. Kanga explores how the way in which a disabled person is treated in a society, reveals less about the limitations of that person concerned, rather more about the society's core values, its deepest anxieties, and the limits of its moral imagination. The success of *Trying to Grow* lies not in resolving its central questions, but by preserving its contradictions as generative spaces. Kanga thereby emphasises on the possibility of a more accessible and equitable world, simultaneously acknowledging the incongruous transformations in this world. In doing so, Kanga compels his readers to join Brit in the ongoing unfinished labour of negotiating and demanding for a disability friendly society, with no easy or quick solutions.

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